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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001897

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA PUTTING THE BRAKES ON SLEIMAN PRESIDENCY?

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea, critical of majority leader Saad Hariri's attempts to force the presidency of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman on his March 14 allies, is not "adamantly against" the idea. However, he conditions his support on an LF say in the nomination of key military leaders, and is pursuing two tracks to hedge his bets. Geagea believes Sleiman's chances for election are slim since the opposition probably will block him, in which case March 14 would be justified in proceeding with a half plus one vote. In a private conversation with the Ambassador, Geagea acknowledged that, while he will back Sleiman for president, he is deeply annoyed at Saad Hariri for not being transparent in his treatment of Geagea. End summary.

PUTTING ON THE BRAKES

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea at his residence in Maarab on November 29. Geagea advisors Joseph Nehme, Elie Khoury, and Jean-Marie Kassab also attended the meeting. Geagea, admitting he was not enthusiastic about a Sleiman presidency, said he was not "adamantly against" him either, even if we was not the "ideal" president. March 14 had made the decision to back Sleiman prematurely. Why are they in such a hurry? he complained, stressing that LF was not rejecting the idea, just asking for more time to study it.

DANGER AHEAD: ARMY CONTROLLED BY PRESIDENT

¶3. (C) The critical issue, Geagea explained, is the "triangle" between the President, LAF Commander, and LAF G-2 Intelligence Director. The LAF Commander could not be a "nobody" who would become a loyal pawn of the President, as this would create a dangerous situation where the president (the former LAF Commander) has the army in his hand. "If you can avoid this danger, then everything else is acceptable," he stated. But Sleiman had refused to provide him with any

commitments in their last meeting; on the contrary, Geagea said, Sleiman amplified our fears by telling us not to worry, he'd take care of it. Sleiman did hell Geagea, however, that the U.S. had a say in the decisions because of its military assistance to the LAF.

¶ 14. (C) Saad is naive, Geagea complained; he thinks if someone is friendly toward his family, they're a good choice. If that better gets along with Hizballah, even better. Saad doesn't want problems with Hizballah, he just wants to keep things as they are. You can't play politics with this! Geagea exclaimed. Although Geagea agreed that electing Sleiman would diminish Aoun's support, he warned that Sleiman would be too busy focusing on Christian-Christian relations to deal with important issues like border control and Hizballah's arms. We want a commander who doesn't meddle with us, he insisted, not someone who will use his position to build a political movement that will compete against us by bringing Aoun supporters on board.

¶ 15. (C) Privately, Geagea told the Ambassador he did not trust Saad Hariri to look out for LF's interests. While Geagea said that in the end he would support Sleiman's candidacy, he was deeply annoyed with Hariri for not treating him as a partner. Saad Hariri treats Walid Jumblatt as a partner, but he expects the Lebanese Forces to simply accept everything Hariri wants, without question and without involvement in the actual decision making. Hariri needs to show that he wants genuine partnership. The Ambassador noted that the Lebanese Forces had little choice but to try to make the relationship with Hariri work. If March 14 unity breaks down, Syria will gain an enormous victory.

PURSUING A TWO-TRACK APPROACH

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¶ 16. (C) Geagea nevertheless agreed it was necessary to make the best out of a bad situation. Lebanese Forces therefore was pursuing a two-track strategy: 1) meeting with Sleiman to build a better relationship with the army and to receive assurances on key military leadership positions, in case Sleiman was elected, and 2) preparing to block his candidacy if their concerns were not addressed. It could start in cabinet, Geagea said, where the two Lebanese Forces ministers (Tourism Minister Joseph Sarkis and Social Minister Nayla Mouawad, who will no doubt be surprised at her sudden honorary LF membership) would vote against an amendment, possible Justice Minister Charles Rizk, an independent, as well.

SLIM CHANCES FOR SLEIMAN

¶ 17. (C) Geagea believed Sleiman had only a small chance of becoming president, predicting that the opposition would block him. Hizballah might not want a president at all, whereas Syria might view him as the product of a deal between March 14 and Hizballah, he explained. Aoun will not oppose him if he gets something in return, Geagea added, reacting to incoming text messages that Aoun had just declared his -- conditional -- support for Sleiman. Commenting on Berri's statement just prior to the meeting that an amendment required unanimous support from all the parties, including Aoun, Geagea said the opposition already had started blocking Sleiman's candidacy, and things did not augur well. If the opposition did block Sleiman, Geagea said this would provide March 14 with justification for moving ahead with a half plus one vote.

COMMENT

¶ 18. (C) We agree with Geagea's summation of the situation: "What a mess!" Geagea is upset with Hariri, Hariri is

annoyed with Geagea, Boutros Harb is annoyed at both. Hariri's "Plan B" so far seems to have created more disarray within March 14 than heightened Lebanon's chances of having a president any time soon. On the positive side, it also seems to have thrown the opposition for a loop, causing Aoun to announce his support for Sleiman (with conditions, naturally) and Berri to postpone the parliamentary electoral session for a sixth time, until December 7.

¶ 9. (C) We believe that Geagea will, in fact, support Sleiman, but Geagea's support is not coming as quickly as Hariri would like. We have been stressing with all of March 14 leaders that, whatever they decide on the presidency, they need to maintain a united front. If not, the opposition will pounce on any signs of division to extract the best possible price for itself in terms of cabinet composition and the next government's program. In that case, March 14 may have won the battle of the presidency, but lost the war in terms of dealing with the tough issues ahead.

FELTMAN